

Statement By

Senator Ben Cardin

Damascus International Airport

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Good afternoon. I am Senator Ben Cardin, and I am joined by five of my colleagues from the United States Congress who I would like to introduce:

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse from the state of Rhode Island; Senator Roger Wicker from the state of Mississippi; Senator Tom Udall from the state of New Mexico; Congressman Mike McIntyre from the state of North Carolina; and Congressman Gwen Moore from the state of Wisconsin. I also want to acknowledge that [Charge d'Affaires] Maura Connelly is here, who has helped us a great deal from our embassy, and we thank her for all of her help.

I want to thank the Syrian government for their hospitality during our short visit to Syria and thank them for making the arrangements so that we could meet with the President and the Foreign Minister.

We are members of the United States Helsinki Commission. It is an independent U.S. agency that monitors the implementation of the Helsinki Accords. Those accords deal with human rights, security, and economic issues. It also has an interest in the OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation. So this region is important to the work that we do in the Helsinki Commission. It was for that reason that we have traveled to Israel and Syria. We have had an opportunity to talk with the President of Syria and the President of Israel concerning the Syria-Israeli peace issues. And here in Syria we have had an opportunity to talk in regards to the Iraqi refugee issue, which is of great interest to our Commission.

The U.S.-Syrian bilateral relations have been difficult over the last several years. Syria has isolated itself by sponsorship of international terrorism, by providing safe havens to terrorist organizations such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and by a troubling relationship with Iran.

I want to emphasize that this delegation does not represent the United States Administration. We are an independent branch of government, the legislative branch. We are excited that we have a new President, and this represents an opportunity to review international issues in this region.

The question we came to try and answer here in Syria is whether or not Syria is ready to make the important and significant decisions that will bring us closer together rather than lose this opportunity to move forward. We had candid discussions today, and we are going to take back what we have learned to the United States Congress. This information will be invaluable to our oversight of the new Obama Administration. Dialogue is important, but actions speak louder than words, so we will be watching Syria's actions very carefully over the next weeks and months.

On the issue of Iraqi refugees, I am pleased that the Syrian Government has taken this issue seriously and has done a lot to make it easier for them under a very difficult situation. We visited the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Syria--their center in Damascus--and we learned about the plight of the over 200,000 refugees registered with the UNHCR in Syria.

We hope that the more than a million Iraqis that are in Syria will be able to go home as the situation stabilizes in Iraq. This is an area where we need to do more to help Syria deal with this issue. We had a chance to talk directly to some of the refugees. And I know that it affected each one of the members of our delegation—the plight that they are going through—and we must do more to help them.

I would be pleased to try to answer some of your questions.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

QUESTION: Syria is requesting that the U.S. Administration practice or exercise a role in the peace process. Do you believe that the new American Administration is willing to take up such a role?

Senator Cardin: Well, I think it is first important that the parties, Israel and Syria, make important steps to move forward in the peace discussions. I made some suggestions to the President that I hope he will consider. It is clear peace will come when the two parties come together in a peace agreement. If the United States can assist that happening, I know it will be a very high priority of this delegation, and I believe we will have some impact and the Administration also will be interested in doing that, but it's up to the Administration to make those judgments. The Administration has spoken, by its designation of Senator Mitchell as a Special Envoy to this region, making it very clear that peace in this region is a very high priority of the Obama Administration. And let me just add, peace between Syria and Israel would be a very important accomplishment for the stability of this region.

QUESTION: As you mentioned, Senator, you had a discussion with President Assad and you said that your delegation will convey some messages to the American Administration, the new American Administration. Do you believe that such messages will be translated into concrete actions, as you just mentioned? Not just words, but actions, as President Assad had made clear in the interview with the Guardian this morning, that they would expect an American Ambassador to come to Syria. Would we expect such actions to take place?

SENATOR CARDIN: Well, the decision on the Ambassador will be made by the Administration; it will not be made by us. But, let me, if I might, ask one of my colleagues who may want to comment on this--Senator Whitehouse.

SENATOR WHITEHOUSE: Let me first extend our thanks to the Syrian government and the Syrian people, in our very brief visit, for the very warm reception that we have received, which included a visit between our spouses and Syria's First Lady. As Senator Cardin has indicated, in the American system of

government, the decisions about actions on foreign policy are made in the executive branch of government, and they will be made by President Obama. One can presume from the interest that President Obama has shown in this area of the world, including the appointment of Senator Mitchell, including his early interview with Al-Jazeera [Al-Arabiya], including his repeated references to this area, that there will indeed be actions. But it is not up to us in the legislative branch of government to presume which actions would be taken first or when they would be taken.

And of course the context of the United States taking action will be in significant measure provided by the willingness of the Syrian government to take action. These actions will be taken in the context of ongoing conversation and engagement between our countries.

QUESTION: Senator, from your position working in the U.S. Senate as well as in the House, would you be able to say when the Syria Accountability Act would be reviewed and possibly a decision taken on that?

SENATOR CARDIN: Well, there is an opportunity with the new election of a president, with the opportunities of showing real progress in this area in fighting terrorism. It is going to be judged by action here in Syria. The president of Syria was very strong in his conversation with us in fighting terrorism. I think the United States is interested in seeing Syria take action by stopping support of terrorist organizations. I mentioned that in my opening statement. We are also concerned about Syria's relationship with Iran. We went over that in our conversations and I think the points were made pretty clearly with the President.

QUESTION: Are these pre-conditions for reconsidering the Syria Accountability Act?

No, I don't want to misconstrue that there is a formula. But clearly Syria needs to act on the underlying causes of why they are isolated.

QUESTION: As we know, the relations between the States and the [Syrian] government is not a love story, so when you ask Syria to do something like to close some offices and to do some measures, at the same time, what the Syrian government wants from the U.S., to have good ties in the future -- I'm not talking

about a matter of a few months, I'm talking about a future for our generation, for America, for Syria. Let's think about our next generation, not a matter of two or three years. Thank you.

SENATOR CARDIN: There is no disagreement on what you just said. We want to have a good relationship with Syria. We think it is important, but there are significant issues that we have at the present time.

And let me respond to one of those that was reported in the press. The Helsinki Commission works very closely on areas of human rights. And although Syria is not a signatory to [the] OSCE, it is to the United Nations. So the manner in which Syria deals with dissent and the freedom of expression and the freedom of press is of interest beyond Syria. As the President said to me, and I would acknowledge on behalf of the United States, no nation is perfect. But Syria has very serious problems on protecting the civil liberties and rights of its own citizens. And we have given the President specific examples.

QUESTION: You mentioned, Senator, that you had the opportunity to meet with the Israeli president and President Assad. Do you think that the Israeli president is willing and is able to foster, or to come forward with the peace process with Syria, especially in the light of the election of an Israeli extremist, rightist government?

SENATOR CARDIN: I mentioned that we met with the Israeli president. We also met with the Israeli Prime Minister, and that would be a better question to be asked to the Prime Minister, rather than the President, just so we get the right players. We also met with the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority. And we just reiterated that peace in this region is critically important to not only the specific countries, to [those] that are engaged in conflict, but the region and indeed the world. It is in everyone's interest.

Israel is in the process of forming a new government. It is our anticipation that that will happen in the next several weeks. We are hopeful that this new government will be one committed towards peace. I think that the United States supports peace, I know the United States supports peace in this region, and we believe that you can move forward on negotiating peace, as well as fighting terrorism. But it is hard to comment on the new government in Israel until it has been formed.

Let me just say, this has been my first visit to Syria; it has obviously been a very brief visit. We've had a chance to meet with a lot of Syrians and I want to just thank them for their friendship and hospitality while we have been here. It has been a very enjoyable trip for our delegation. We look forward to returning and hopefully moving forward with peace in this region. Thank you all very much.

END TRANSCRIPT##